



**Obesity in dogs and cats
welfare and ethics**

Sandøe, Peter; Corr, Sandra; Palmer, Clare

Published in:
22ND FECAVA Eurocongress, 31. VÖK Jahrestagung 31ST VOEK Annual Meeting

Publication date:
2016

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Sandøe, P., Corr, S., & Palmer, C. (2016). Obesity in dogs and cats: welfare and ethics. In 22ND FECAVA Eurocongress, 31. VÖK Jahrestagung 31ST VOEK Annual Meeting: *Animal Welfare, Proceedings* (pp. 19-22)



Obesity in dogs and cats – welfare and ethics

Peter Sandøe^a, Sandra Corr^b, and Clare Palmer^c

^a Department of Food and Resource Economics and Department of Large Animal Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

^b School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, UK

^c Department of Philosophy, Texas A&M University, Texas, USA

One of the most basic concerns of animal care is to ensure that animals are properly fed. This is reflected in the first principle of the “Five Freedoms”, set up to define the basic requirements of animal welfare by the British Farm Animal Welfare Council (now Farm Animal Welfare Committee). The principle states that animals must enjoy “Freedom from hunger and thirst - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour”.

Companion animals are increasingly viewed as family members, clearly benefiting from the affluence of their owners. Parallel to – and partly caused by – this development, there has been a significant change in the way people feed their companion animals. Rather than feeding them scraps and leftovers, increasing numbers of dogs and cats are fed readymade feed, either in a dry or a wet (canned) form. The production of this feed is regulated to ensure proper balance of macronutrients, vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients.

However, irrespective of the quality of the diet fed to companion animals, it can still be fed in too large quantities. Overfeeding, particularly in combination with too little exercise, leads to obesity and increases the risk of related diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, skeletal disease and various forms of cancer. These diseases shorten the expected lifespan of the animals, and often adversely affect their quality of life. There are also negative impacts on the owners in terms of worry and grief about their companions’ health and early death, as well as the potential costs of veterinary treatment.

In this presentation, which is largely based on Ch. 8 in Sandøe et al. (2016), we will focus on the problem of overfeeding dogs and cats, and how the problem is brought about via the animals’ companionship with humans.

Obesity as a complex welfare problem

There is a huge body of veterinary literature documenting that obesity in dogs and cats increases the risk of other health problems. As these conditions shorten the expected lifespan of the affected animals, and potentially reduce their quality of life, obesity in cats and dogs has considerable potential to reduce welfare. Thus, overweight companion animals potentially both lose quality and years of life.

On the other hand, work with rodents and pigs indicates that a restrictive diet of the sort that secures maximum longevity and minimum morbidity causes welfare problems in the form of increased hunger, and derived effects in terms of increased aggression, elevated levels of stress and the development of stereotypies. Assuming the same conclusions would apply to dogs and cats, there may be a real dilemma here between two of the five freedoms: it may not always be possible to secure both freedom from hunger and from disease.

In fact, determining the optimal feeding strategy may depend on how welfare is defined. If welfare is defined in terms of fitness and function then a very restricted feeding regime may be optimal. In contrast, if welfare is defined as getting the maximum amount of pleasure and the minimum amount of frustration or pain – either in total over a full life or per year lived – then a more liberal feeding regime may be preferable, as the avoidance of disease should be balanced against the potential frustration and stress relating to hunger. However, many dogs and cats end up becoming so fat that the negative health effects of obesity probably ultimately outweigh any satisfaction gained from eating.

Why do owners allow their dogs and cats to become obese?

This leads us to the obvious next question: why do owners who generally seem to love their cats and dogs allow the animals to grow fat, and in doing so, compromise their welfare?

At a simple level, there appears to be a number of ways in which owners can prevent cats and dogs from becoming overweight. They can feed them less in terms of volume, and/or they can feed them diets that are less dense in calories. They may be able to exercise them more (or, in the case of cats, make more opportunities for exercise available). Yet despite this apparent simplicity, many owners find this very difficult. A number of studies have investigated more complex questions about





whether there is a link between particular characteristics of the owners of cats and dogs, and the risk of their companion animals becoming obese.

These studies found a relationship between obesity in dogs and in their owners: if the owner weighs too much it is more likely that the dog will also be overweight or obese. However, the same relationship is not found between owners and their cats. In the case of dogs, studies seem to indicate a link with the owner's income: the poorer the owner, the more likely it is that the dog weighs too much. A corresponding link is not found in the case of cats.

These first two findings reflect the well-documented but complex relationship between obesity and low social status in humans; and it is not surprising that habits and constraints relating to people's own lives influence how they view and treat the animals in their care.

When owners allow their beloved companions to become obese, a number of psychological mechanisms may be involved. Several studies link the psychological characteristics of cat and dog owners with the risk of the animal becoming overweight and obese. For example, in the same way as parents of overweight children systematically underestimate their children's weight, a number of studies show that owners of overweight or obese dogs and cats underestimate the body condition of their animals.

Some may object to attempts to explain the problem of overweight companion animals by reference to a 'spill-over' of the owners' attitudes towards themselves and their companions. While a person's desire to eat may be very strong, it is less clear how such desires would cause the individual to overfeed their companion animal. After all, a person experiences her or his own food cravings, but she or he does not experience the cravings of the dog or the cat. However this may be analogous to the situation of parents with very young children: parents do not actually feel their child's hunger pangs, but even though small children cannot open fridges they soon learn how to make their parents do it for them. Similarly, cats and dogs may manipulate their owners, if the owners are open to the signals the animals send.

Just as one would like to think that very few parents intentionally allow their children to become obese, it seems unlikely that many dog and cat owners intentionally compromise the welfare and health of their companions by overfeeding them. Rather it seems that owners of fat companions may overfeed their animals due to a number of factors, some of which they have limited control over, much in the same way as they are drawn into overfeeding themselves and their children.

Possible solutions to the problem

A number of solutions, often involving assistance from a veterinarian, are on offer to prevent and deal with overweight and obesity in dogs and cats. These strategies are valuable as far as they go. However, a striking feature of the proposed solutions is that they all appeal to individual action, and do not consider the political, social and related human issues that seem to underlie the problem. It may be necessary for people to be able to appreciate and tackle their own lifestyles, before they can appreciate and address the problems related to the overfeeding of their companions. Resolving these social issues will require far wider ranging solutions.

Finally, given these social issues, as well as owners' psychological states, it is important to avoid moralising, i.e. condemning people for doing what they – to some degree, at least – cannot help doing. Simply condemning owners of fat companions without either helping them, or addressing the underlying social problems, may simply worsen the stigmatisation and low self-esteem that already face obese people in many societies.

Sandøe, P., Corr, S. & Palmer, C.: *Companion Animal Ethics*. Wiley-Blackwell/UFAW Animal Welfare Series: Chichester 2016.



22ND FECAVA
Eurocongress

31. VÖK Jahrestagung
31ST VOEK Annual Meeting

22–25 June 2016
Hofburg, Vienna

www.fecava2016.org

Proceedings





22. FECAVA Eurocongress

31st Annual Congress of the
Association of Austrian small animal
veterinarians

Animal Welfare

in cooperation with



BUNDESMINISTERIUM
FÜR GESUNDHEIT



FECAVA

Federation of European Companion
Animal Veterinary Associations

Hofburg, Vienna
June 22 - 25, 2016

Table of content



Speakers	4
The dog-human relationship: new insights into its cognitive and emotional building blocks	5
Behaviour problems and compromised welfare in pet dogs - a chicken and egg problem: Does compromised welfare lead to behaviour problems or is it the other way round?	8
Human attachment to dogs and cats and its ethical implications	12
The ethics of killing animal patients: Attitudes of Austrian veterinarians regarding euthanasia in small animal practice	15
Obesity in dogs and cats – welfare and ethics	19
Welfare concerns about pedigree dog breeding – almost 10 years of progress?	23
Remarks on Pet Animal Transports	28
10 ideas to apply animal welfare in small animal practice	35